Interview with Florence Alwyn Twyman, Navy nurse during the Vietnam War. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 19 November 2003.

Where are you from originally?
Right here in California.

Where did you go to school?
My dad was a teacher so we moved around a bit, but I graduated from high school in Antioch, which is about 15 or 20 miles east of here [Walnut Creek].

When did you decide you wanted to be a nurse?
I don't exactly remember, but in my era, a woman either became a secretary, a teacher, or a nurse. I think I was a teenager when I decided to become a nurse.

Where did you go to nursing school?
University of California. In those days we started in Berkeley. We spent 2 years there, then went to the medical campus in San Francisco for 3 years. It was a 5-year course. I graduated in 1943.

Did you work in a private hospital after that?
Briefly, while awaiting results of the state boards. This was in the middle of the war. At that point, they were threatening to draft nurses. The dean of the nursing school had been in the Army Nurse Corps in World War I so she encouraged us to go into the service. I went into the Navy right after I took my state boards.

How did you join the Navy in those days?
I took the physical and I was accepted pending the outcome of my state board exam. I graduated in May and reported in September of '43 to the the U.S. Naval Hospital Seattle.
In those days, we didn't have to go through officer candidate school or anything like that. We really didn't have to do much as far as training. Well, we did a few drills up there in Seattle, but we didn't have time for much else because we were too busy taking care of patients.

So you ended up working there at the hospital in Seattle?
Yes. I went in as an ensign. They called it relative rank then.

Where did they assign you in the hospital?
I worked on the communicable disease ward and then was put on special duty with a polio patient. That was when we were doing Kenny packs.

What was that all about?
It was a treatment that was something that was developed by a nun named Sister [Elizabeth] Kenny. This was long before polio whots. My patient was a young sailor who had contracted polio.
What was the Kenny pack?
It was a way of applying heat packs several times a day to the affected part of the patient. In this case it was his legs. It was the accepted treatment in those days.

Did it do any good?

I don't know how much. I never did get any follow up. He was discharged and I often wondered what happened to him. But, yes, they did some good.

Where did you go after that?

I went to work on the eye ward for about a year. I was promoted to j.g. and then almost immediately was transferred to the hospital at the U.S. Naval Training Center, Bainbridge, Maryland. I was there until the war was over and then I was transferred up to New York to the old naval hospital on Flushing Avenue in Brooklyn. I left there in '46 for separation. I know that they closed the hospital a few years later.

What was life like working at Brooklyn?

I liked it. It was very interesting. I worked mostly on the surgical ward. It was great to be able to go into Manhattan and do a lot of things. I was there less than a year before I was discharged. You see, I had broken service. I got out in '46 and retained my reserve commission. I was then recalled for Korea in 1950. A lot of us were. I immediately went to Yokosuka, Japan.

What year was that?

It was 1950.

So you were at Yokosuka at the beginning of the Korean War.

It was December of 1950. I got there just about the time they broke out of the Chosin Reservoir. They were mostly frostbite patients and it was awful. We lost quite a few of them. We must have had about 5,000 patients at one time. That hospital increased in size very quickly. All of us received the Navy Unit Citation for our duty there.

How long were you at Yokosuka?

About a year and a half. I came home in the summer of '52.

Were you discharged again when you got home?

No. While I was in Yokosuka, I shipped over to regular Navy. Because at that point, there was no assurance that we couldn't be recalled again, so I decided to stay in. My chief nurse encouraged me to go regular Navy.

Now you had yourself a career on your hands.

Yes, and I've never been sorry.

Where did you go after Yokosuka?

I went to Naval Hospital Annapolis at the Naval Academy. It was sure different but very enjoyable. That was the first of my two tours in that area. I liked taking care of midshipmen. It was very different from what I'd done before.

It was a relatively small hospital but I worked mostly with midshipmen patients. We also took care of dependents and did a little of everything there, including obstetrics, pediatrics. The big cases, of course, went to Bethesda.

How long were you there?

I think about 2 years. I left in '55 and went to Monterey. We had an air station that serviced the schools there. It was a dispensary with a few inpatients but mostly outpatients. That was only a 2-year tour.

Then I did a tour at Minneapolis on recruiting duty. It certainly was quite a change. I had never been to the Midwest before. I visited nursing schools all over the upper Midwest, usually with my counterparts in the Army and Air force.

Where did you end up after that assignment?

I came out to Oak Knoll for 2 years, then got the orders to Saigon.

How did all that happen? I'll bet you didn't even know where Saigon was at that time.

I didn't. I was assistant chief nurse then. The Chief Nurse called and told me I had orders to Saigon. My response was, "Where?" At that time, it was very early in U.S. involvement in Vietnam. My colleagues there at Oak Knoll didn't know any more about Vietnam than I did.

When she told you you were going to Saigon, did you prepare in any way for going there? Did they tell you what job was going to be?

Yes, as senior Nurse Corps officer. They were just shifting from an Army to a Naval Support Activity. (Penny) Chloe Kaufman and I were the first Navy nurses to go. Our senior medical officer was already there when we arrived.

You say you went with Penny Kaufman. Is she still around?

I have no idea. I came home from Saigon a few weeks before she did. And I never kept up with her after that.

But you were saying, as far as preparation was concerned, you really didn't know much about it.

No. I knew that I was going to a dispensary and the dispensary was run at that point by the State Department. There was one State Department nurse and a couple of Army nurses, I think. But they were switching over to become a Naval Support Activity. Some Navy corpsmen were there and some Army medics were still there. It was kind of a transition period.

What do you recall about getting to Vietnam?

I flew out of Travis in February or March of '63, and landed in Hawaii in the middle of the night so we couldn't even get anything to eat at the airport. Then we flew out of there to Tan Son Nhut in Saigon.

When you left the aircraft, what did you see and what did you feel?

Hot, hot, hot. It was always 93 degrees in Saigon no matter what. As I recall, we had to hitch a ride into Saigon due to some confusion. That's what I remember most--the oppressive heat. Talk about humidity! That's the way it was the whole time.

It must have looked fairly exotic with the people and. . .

Yes, in some ways, although I think I was somewhat prepared having already done the tour in the Far East before, in Japan. Yet it was quite different in a lot of ways.

We went to the Majestic Hotel right on the river and stayed there overnight. Then we went to our quarters at the Ham Nghi in Saigon.

Was the Ham Nghi a hotel or a barracks?

At that time, everything was hotels. It had been a hotel on the main circle in Saigon. We were relieving two Army nurses but we never saw them; they left the very next day after we arrived. We were billeted on the eighth floor. On the floor below us, a lot of the Army officers were billeted. But we did have an Army WAC, a major who ran the Army transportation. She was there for several weeks after we got there. She was interesting in that she had been brought up in North Vietnam and spoke some Vietnamese. Her father had been a diplomat.

So you and Penny Kaufman were really the first two Navy nurses to get to Vietnam.

Absolutely.

You were staying at the Ham Nghi. Your berthing was there. Where did you report for duty?

To the dispensary. Our senior medical officer was already there. His name was CAPT Lou Gens.

Where was the dispensary in Saigon?

It was right downtown. Not too long after we got there, we started looking around to negotiate for a place to start a hospital. At that point it was just a dispensary.

What did it look like as a medical facility?

It was ordinary dispensary or clinic setup. There were several rooms. Of course, we didn't have any big cases. If anything was really wrong with any of our personnel, they were airevaced out. Most of the dependents were gone by that time, except some from the State Department. And, of course, there were quite a few embassy personnel there.

You knew the dispensary hadn't been adequate. Were you getting a lot of patients and needed a bigger facility?

By this time, the military was starting to build up and we knew we would have to have an inpatient facility because more and more of the Army and some of the Navy were arriving in greater numbers.

So you obviously needed something bigger.

Yes, and apparently that was the intent. That's what CAPT Gens said. He and I subsequently spent quite a bit of time talking to different people and trying to find a suitable place to set up a hospital. We eventually settled on what had been a hotel. In that part of the world, when it came time to negotiate, it was usually the woman that we dealt with.

Were you negotiating for buying the building or renting it?

I presume that we rented it.

So you were dealing with the owner of the hotel--who was a woman?
I don't know whether she owned it herself, or her family did.

These were Vietnamese not French.
Oh, sure.

So it was you and CAPT Gens who did the negotiating.
Yes. We thought we had one place but that fell through. You had to take your time negotiating with the Vietnamese. Nothing happened overnight. We eventually settled on what became the Station Hospital.

Henry Cabot Lodge was the ambassador at that time. Did you have any contact with him?
Oh, sure. His wife was quite a character and very nice. She'd come over now and then and say that she wanted to do some painting. We thought she wanted to put a painting of hers in there. But, no. She wanted to help us paint the walls, etc. The ambassador visited patients every so often.
The rest of the Navy nurses arrived as soon as we moved into the building. That was about halfway through my tour.

How many arrived?
Six.

Were Bobbi and Tweedie in that group?
Yes. And Jan Barcott. Bobbi and Tweedie ended up billeted with us, the others at another hotel.

So you were there a few months before they showed up.
Yes. It was close to being halfway through my tour, which was a year. Everybody's tour was a year.

Once you got the Station Hospital all set up, what kinds of patients were you seeing?
We'd get some from the field. There were a lot of Army personnel right there in Saigon at the headquarters. Because some of the dependents were still there, we still did a lot of outpatient treatment for them and embassy personnel. But they were mostly military.
We had three or four Thai nurses on the staff. We couldn't use Vietnamese nurses because they weren't sufficiently trained. The Thais had been trained in Bangkok by the Seventh Day Adventist nursing school there.

Were you seeing casualties at this point?
The only casualties we saw were when the theater was blown up. That happened after we were all there. (That's in Bobbi's book.)
Previous to that, we'd get an occasional casualty from up country but if they were serious, we treated them and they were airevaced out.

As I recall, this was a particularly turbulent time to be in Saigon.

Yes. It was during the time Diem was overthown. And shortly thereafter, Kennedy was assassinated.

And the Buddhists were protesting by burning themselves to death.

Yes. I can remember one time telling the cab driver to get away from one place because we were heading into a group of protesters and I wanted no part of getting in the middle of it. We had a big balcony at the Ham Nghi. The protesters would be on loud speakers almost incessantly. There was always a lot of activity at the circle. And we got to see a lot of the activity. Physically, it reminded me, a little, of Columbus Circle in New York.

Was there a sense that this place was about to explode into some kind of violence?

Oh, we knew the coup was coming. It was just a matter of when. That particular day, I had been at the military attache's house for lunch. I became fairly good friends with him and his wife because they had a child who was allergic to stinging insects. So we had to give him allergy shots. He was a funny kid who would only take the shots from me. I had gone over to their house--he was an Army colonel. He got a phone call while we were at lunch, then came back and said, "The coup has started." He and I then got in the car posthaste. He dropped me off at the hospital and he went back to the embassy. He didn't seem at all surprised by the coup.

We couldn't leave the hospital for quite a while but they finally allowed us to go home. Toward evening, they wouldn't let a lot of the Army officers who lived at the Ham Nghi to go to the Rex Hotel, where their mess was. We had our own mess, so to speak, in that we had a cook and a maid. So we doled out what little food we had to help feed them.

This was happening while there was fighting going on in the streets below.

Yes. Fortunately, they weren't very good shots.

Did you fear for your lives?

Actually, the main fire occurred when they shot up the presidential palace and all that. We could hear the shooting and, once in a while, a volley came a bit close. Mostly, we could see and hear it but it was some distance away. We all went over to see the palace the next day after things calmed down.

When things quieted down the following day, did you go back to the hospital and begin taking care of patients again?

Yes, the next day. We had to take care of the patients who were there.

Were any of these patients who had been injured in the fighting?

I don't think so. We had an occasional Vietnamese patient but I don't recall anyone who had been injured as a direct result of the fighting.

When you wandered around the day after the coup was over, what did you see?

We mainly went to see the palace and the barracks that had been shelled so heavily. I remember seeing the wreckage.

After the coup and GEN Khanh took over, were you beginning to get casualties from up country as far as Americans?

Sometimes. By this time, the Army had set up a hospital up in Nha Trang. CAPT Gens and I went up there on a visit one time to see the Army hospital. The fighting was starting to pick up by this time. But we didn't get many casualties. The Army was getting most of them.

What would a typical day have been like for you at the Station Hospital?

It was very much like any other small hospital. We'd go in, care for the patients, make rounds. They did some surgery. But those surgeries were relatively minor. We worked a 5-day week, but I went in on a Saturday morning for half a day, I remember.

When did you leave that assignment in Saigon?

In was the end of February of '64.

Did someone come over to relieve you?

Yes. I was scheduled on a flight on a particular day, so I never met my relief. She must have arrived within days of when I left.

Did you leave from Tan Son Nhut?

Yes.

What kind of feeling did you have about leaving?

I was very anxious to go home because it was confining. There were long periods when it was very quiet. When it was, we could go over to the old French Circle Sportif club and eat and swim and play tennis. A lot of it was very pleasant. My impression of Saigon was . . . It had once been called the Paris of the Orient. But one got the feeling that it was kind of an old has-been. Much of it was pleasant and it certainly wasn't very hectic or anything like when I was in Japan.

What did you find at home that surprised you? Was it the attitude of the people?

You just didn't run around saying that you'd been in Vietnam. There weren't any protests then and things hadn't turned ugly. Nobody seemed to know anything about it.

So no one was really curious about what you had experienced?

No. It seemed that way. I went from there to Bremerton, Washington. And it was a totally different atmosphere.

You worked at the Naval Hospital there? How long were you there?

Just about 2 years. And then I went to Quantico as Chief Nurse. I requested the Washington area because I was getting married at that point and my husband had orders to the Pentagon.

When did you retire?

I retired from Quantico as a commander in '68. I had made commander when I was at Oak Knoll.

What did you do after you retired?

I did not do any more nursing. I've done a lot of volunteer activities but didn't volunteer in hospitals.

Do you ever think about the time you spent in Vietnam?

Oh, sure. And then, of course, I have a good friend who lives here in Fairfield. I go up there periodically. We talk about those days every now and again. Subsequently, when the war got really nasty, I never said much about having been there.

It's interesting to note that you and Penny Kaufman were the first two Navy nurses to be in Vietnam so you're both historic characters. You probably never thought of yourself that way.

No. Not really.

You were pioneers.

Sort of. I know that Lou Gens was very glad to see us. It was an interesting time.